

in conversation

*The following email interview was held between Tamlin Blake and Mandy Conidaris in September 2013 following a meeting in Cape Town in May.*

**MC - On your website it says that you have a 'fascination with materials and processes and manipulating new mediums in ways which take them past the merely decorative or prosaic'. It also describes your interest in tapestry as a form of narrative, of story-telling. Regarding your *Newspaper Tapestries*, of which the works exhibited here form part, you speak of the necessity of interconnectedness for humankind, not only with each other in relationships, but also with one's physical spaces in terms of a greater understanding of environmental health. Your choice of recycled newspaper as a weaving material seems particularly appropriate in terms of the material choice tying together your technique and your creative concerns. Could you comment a little on these points?**

**TB -** At heart I am a sculptor. I might work with two dimensional images but the nature of production is based in the realm of three dimensions. I enjoy working with materials that take up space, even if it is not a lot of space. I also like exploring materials that aren't normally considered fine art mediums and treating them as though they are, cajoling and twisting them into new forms. While I respect traditional craft techniques and spend much time researching them, materials for me are not an end in themselves but a tool for conveying a concept or notion, a means of creating a space for contemplation or discussion.

Newspaper is a compelling medium for many reasons. It is a disposable commodity and to me represents our fast-paced, self-obsessed, throw-away culture and our questionable relationship with the environment. In terms of recycling increasing our awareness of our immediate environment and how we live in our homes is the first step to becoming aware of more global issues. To be sustainable recycling has to fit into our chaotic everyday lives and become part of our life-style. By making small changes in the beginning one can slowly build up to forming a sustainable habit of recycling and more conscious consumerism. I decided to work with a material that was easy to come by and which in my world was an immediate problem and concern. Newspaper was a good place to start.

As a personal philosophy I believe in the interconnectedness of all things. Our lives are woven together with the people and environment around us. The newspaper tapestries illustrate this point by weaving together the stories of our contemporary lives. They create new images and patterns out of news, sports results, classified ads and local gossip. In themselves the tapestries form a new narrative which reflects our multi-faceted contemporary lives. Recycling it from something temporary and fleeting into something precious and more permanent conveys a sense of correcting some imbalance, of perhaps restoring some awareness of our environmental responsibility.

**MC - Do you remember a specific trigger that started you down this path?**

**TB** - During 2008 I took some time off to dedicate to my young children and to start looking for a new direction for my art practice. I becoming more aware of the piles of recyclable material around me, specifically newspaper and discovered artists on the Internet who were spinning it, knitting it and otherwise weaving newspaper into sculptural forms. The idea of using a recyclable and transitory material like newspaper to make something precious and more weighty intrigued me, as did the notion of creating a material from scratch then using that to work with. I was particular drawn to creating images that retold the stories contained in the newspaper medium I was using.

**MC - What have been your creative influences in terms of other artists or art movements? (ideas or techniques)**

**TB** - At the University of Stellenbosch I studied under lecturers like Brett Murray and Allan Alborough and was encouraged to see alternate possibilities in almost all materials and to entice meaning out of strange and interesting forms. Pegs, safety pins and cable ties all became interesting possibilities as well as steeped in conceptual possibility.

I also took drawing classes under Paul Emsley who taught a strict respect for materials and to be disciplined in my art practice. Together with his tuition and my training as a botanical artist I learnt to pay close attention to detail and my work ethic became instilled with a sense of patience and endurance. I also learnt much from the botanical artists themselves, warm and welcoming people with a willingness to share technical secrets.

I have also spent much time pouring over the work of fibre artists all over the world who work with, for example, tapestry, knitting and rug making and whose work confronts cultural issues such as domesticity and the repetitive tasks related to women's work and gender politics. Mostly though, I am inspired by the world around me, the interplay of strange shapes, colours and textures as well as the strange stories and happenings that form part of my everyday existence.

**MC - Over time, what role have these processes played in your image creation?**

**TB** - Working as a botanical artist taught me to look very carefully at the physical world around me. We often think we know what things look like but in fact we only see a fraction of the interesting details and truths available to us. Generally, we summarise our world in a glance. The patience and awareness I learnt through this art form taught me to look for the unnoticed details that inform our reality and also allows me now to work on large and often arduous projects and to see them through to the end.

The study of the fibre art that I so enjoy still encourages me to keep working at the tapestries and to explore even further the technical challenges of a new medium and to work conceptually with the material and the images I employ. It also made me aware, and wary, of the challenge that fibre art faces where the meaning of the work of art is often

eclipsed by the study of the materials used and their history, rather than what it contributes to the overall work of art.

**MC - The six works exhibited here are images of interaction and/or coexistence between a bird and the female human form. What is the significance of the bird in your personal visual vocabulary?**

**TB** - Birds for me represent a sense of freedom, movement and energy. They can fly and inhabit a world all their own. They live in another dimension and view the world from a different angle. They are perhaps also a symbol of a free spirit not bound by earthly concerns and within an image they provide a sense of expectation, providing perhaps a message or warning. Yet a bird can be trapped, examined and frightened and *en-mass* they can in turn be frightening. Flocks of birds tend to be overwhelming or provide a sense of apprehension or foreboding.

The smaller birds in the Holding Bird series symbolise for me the capture and study of joy and inner wisdom or intuition and our general distrust of that intuition. They represent Western culture's need to control, study and bring to order, to trap and examine.

Without purposefully studying what each bird symbolises I find myself choosing images of birds which best suit the atmosphere of the work I am producing. In retrospect, however, it is interesting to see what each bird traditionally represents and to see how well they usually echo my overall intention for each image. Where doves are symbols of love and peace, pigeons symbolise gossip and the blame of actions on others which echoes the use of newspaper and the reweaving of people's stories in "Wallpaper" and "Flight". And in the work "Waiting" falcons are protectors and symbols of spiritual achievements.

**MC - Your making technique is particularly time-consuming and labour-intensive. Your working process must have a very meditative quality. How do you assess your image afterwards from the perspective of its meanings to you the artist, such as the memories it evokes of your thought processes during the making?**

**TB** - The making process does take a lot of time. It is a wonderful way to meditate and for much of the time I simply try not to think and to pay attention to the process. Eventually however my head starts to drive me crazy and I resort to listening to audio books – anything from thrillers to biographies. This works well to keep the right brain busy while the left brain gets on with the work.

I can't say that each work is imbued with a particular feeling though I do hope that they reflect some of my sense of calm and contemplation. Perhaps though, on some subtle level, they do reflect the subtle intrigue of fictional murder and blackmail?

**MC - Is the work's significance to the viewer important to you?**

**TB** - I approach each new work with an overall feeling or concept that I would like to portray. I then select images and patterns that I feel resonate with that idea and then see, often to my own amazement, what images or stories develop. The interpretation of those stories I leave for the viewer to glean. While I find these interpretations interesting I have no desire to manage them.

**MC** - **Your work crosses boundaries around the long-standing art/craft debate. You said to me that for some viewers, whose prime focus is on contemporary visual arts, their initial impulse is to dismiss the work as 'craft', since you have created it using the technique of weaving, normally associated with traditional craft. They often walk away at that point without taking time to engage with the work at a deeper level. If given the chance, what issues would you raise to encourage these viewers to give your work some of their time?**

**TB** - Fibre art, or art created with materials commonly associated with craft, is often overlooked because of its long association with domestic or utilitarian production. However, these works do more than simply follow a pattern. Like any engaging art form their inherent meaning goes beyond the literal meaning of the materials. If one dismisses work simply for its material components, one could miss some interesting and challenging experience.

**MC** - **Your tapestries are made from recycled newspaper, traditionally considered an 'unstable' medium archivally. Does your work have a lifespan to its existence? If so, how have you negotiated this aspect of your work with the collectors who support you?**

**TB** - I have not had any problems in this regards with collectors many of whom have large collections of various forms of contemporary art including works on paper, those made from latex, chocolate and soap as well as Picasso's newspaper collages. The tapestries are to an extent living pieces that will change with time. However, while the colour of the work may change the newspaper threads are securely held by the cotton warp threads and if exhibited and stored correctly under museum conditions and behind UV glass these works will last well.

**Thank you Tamlin!**